MUNDARI

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Foreword

Odisha occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for being the home to 62 varieties of culturally vibrant Scheduled Tribes including the 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs).The Mundari is one among them.

The Mundari belonging to the Munda language family is found in Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. They are a part of the larger Munda-Kol group and are settled agriculturalists. They have a hierarchy of clans and clusters of clans to maintain group solidarity and regulate marriage and socio-economic relationships. In some villages, dominant clans own land. The clan elders mediate in fixing marriage and bride price.

Family is the smallest social unit in Mundari tribe. The Mundari society is patrilineal and the residence is pre-dominantly patrilocal. Among them the common mode of acquiring a mate is through negotiation. Other approved modes of marriage are by mutual consent, elopement, service, intrusion and exchange. Interestingly, while in marriage by service, a poor boy unable to afford the expenses of a regular marriage along with the bride price freely serves the parents of his chosen bride for some time to acquire the bride in marriage at the end of her probation, it is the reverse in cases of marriage by intrusion. In this case the bride forcibly enters and stays in the family of the boy she wants to marry till the latter agrees to accept her as his life partner. This shows the liberty enjoyed by tribal women in choosing their mates.

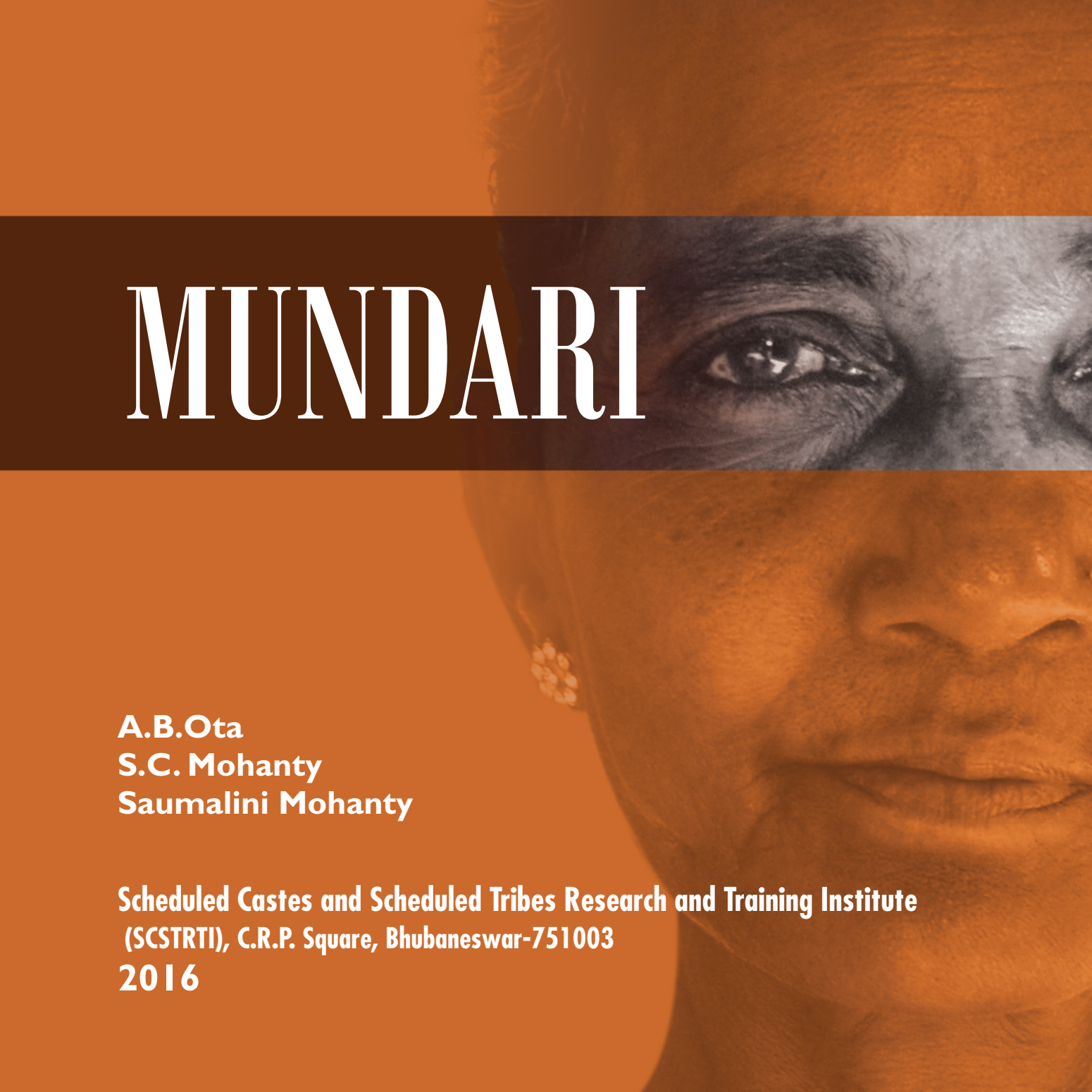
Sing Bonga - the Sun God otherwise called dharam debta is their supreme god.

Besides hinting at the socio-cultural identity of Mundari people, this hand book depicts their settlement and habitation, demographic perspective, social life, economy, social organisation, dress and ornaments and their development intervention and perception in a concise way which will be useful for students, academicians, inquisitive tourists, laymen and development functionaries.

This photographic documentation of their life style is a part of the series on the tribes of Odisha. Prof. (Dr) A. B. Ota, Director, Shri S.C. Mohanty, OSD and Ms.S. Mohanty, Museum Guide have taken did everything to bring out this colourful booklet. I hope this work would be of immense help for the tribal lovers, tribal tourists, tribal researchers and general readers.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary
ST & SC Development Department
Government of Odisha

MUNDARI



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IDENTITY

The Mundari is a part of the larger Munda group. The Kol, Kol Lohara, Ho and Mundari - all belong to the same group as the Kolha, who are considered being part of the larger Munda group. Mostly Mundari people are found in Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. They speak a language called Mundari, which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Their major occupation is settled cultivation and industrial labour. Hinduism with admixture of animism is professed by the Mundari. Normally, the Mundari identify them as 'Hodoko' which means "Human Beings". They have been living in the same region or place for quite a long time, treating it as their home land.

Physical Characteristics

The physical characteristics of the Mundaris are asserted by modern Anglo-Indian ethnologists to be of Dravidian type. The colour of the skin of the tribe in general is black to brown. The head of the person is found to be long (dolico-cephalic), the nose is thick and broad and sometimes depressed at the root, the lips are thick, the facial angle is comparatively low, the face is wide and fleshy and the features being irregular, the figure seems to be squat. The limbs of man or woman are sturdy and well formed and the stature is rather short. They possess a very strong muscular body, a good chest, powerful jaws.

Population & Concentration

According to 2011 census, the total population of the Mundari tribe is 25,655 (male 12,725 and female 12,930). Their sex ratio is 1016 females per thousand males according to 2011 census. Their literacy rate is 59.89 % (71.54 % for the males and 48.55% for the females). The decadal population growth rates among the Mundari tribe during the period from1961 to 1971, 1971 to 1981, 1981 to 1991, 1991 to 2001 and 2001 to 2011 are 0.71%, 38.48%, 26.27%, -23.48 % and 7.64% respectively.

Dress & Ornaments

The dress and ornaments of the Mundari people can be well characterized as very simple and scanty. Their men ordinarily wear a loin-cloth. This cloth is from six to nine cubits long and has colour borders but on the festive occasions, young men also wear a sort of belt around their waist. These are sometimes made of cocoon-silk. The dress of the Mundari women normally consists of a long piece of cloth. But due to modernization the men are wearing pants and shirts and the women are wearing polyester sarees with blouse.

Besides these, the Mundari women like to leave their head and feet usually uncovered. However while going to the markets or to the towns, some well-to-do Mundaris wear 'pagris'. The pagri is a long piece of cotton cloth which is woven round the head in coils. It serves as a symbol of prestige and provides a proctective cover for their head. During rainy season, the Mundari people use bamboo-umbrella, cloth umbrella and a type of circular rain-hat made of leaves of a creeper for their daily use. The Mundari women, in particular, use elongated rain-hats which cover their head and back down to the feet.

Young women are fond of decorating themselves with a large variety of brass ornaments as jewellery other than brass is out of affordable limit for most of the Mundari families. Besides these, the ear-rings made of silver and even of cheaper gold, are, however occasionally used, mostly in some important functions and social gatherings by well-to-do families. As observation reveals, the ornaments ordinarily worn are for the arms, brass bracelets called sakom and kakana, and for the legs, brass anklets called andu, necklaces hisir and for the ears, ear ring lutur. Besides this, traditionally the women of older generation also use iron bracelets called beras.

SETTLEMENT & HOUSING PATTERN

The Mundari usually live in multi-ethnic villages having their separate hamlets. They have linear pattern of settlement with two rows of houses facing each other along a common road or footpath. They generally build their houses in separate enclosures, each being a separate unit. Every house has its own spacious fence enclosing the house proper, cowshed, harvest ground and storage space for straw and firewood. Each Mundari village has a sacred grove called *sarna* that is the place of the village deity, located preferably in the village outskirts.

The residence of a well-to-do Mundari family usually consists of four or five dwelling units. But majority of houses consist each of at least two huts. They use one room as sleeping-room and the other as eating-room. In addition to this, mandi ora, the kitchen room includes the sacred tabernacle where the spirits of ancestors are worshipped.

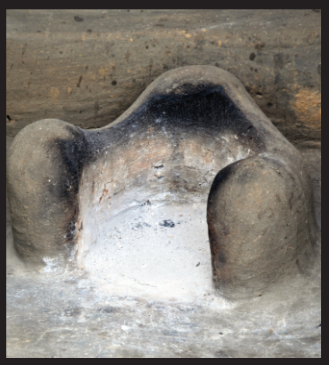
The houses of the well-to-do families are supported by wooden posts and have often tiled and asbestos roofs whereas the poorer Mundaris live in the thatched houses. Generally, the posts and rafters are made of sal-wood obtained from the local jungles. The walls of the houses are made of mud and small wooden bars or narrow bamboos.

Household Assets

A study of the assets of the Mundari household indicates that for cooking purposes, normally they use pots made of silver. To carry the water from the distant water sources, the women generally place the earthen jars (gharas) and aluminium jars on a small straw-pad (binda) over their head. It has also been documented that 'Purus' or cups made of sal-leaves are occasionally used to drink liquids, mainly liquors by the tribesmen.

An examination of the household utilities and decorations indicate that various types of bamboo-baskets are used as cup-boards by the tribal households for keeping and storing household goods. The main staple food paddy is stored in *potoms* which are made of bundles of straw-strings. The grain is carried and kept in big-baskets, locally named as *khanchis*. Moreover, a number of small sized baskets named as *tunkis* are used for carrying paddy-seeds to the fields, and to keep cereals, vegetables etc. The children of the families also use very small baskets, called *tupas*, to gather various edible leaves and roots. To light the house, a family uses hurricane lanterns and lamps. To sweep their house and courtyards, the Mundari women use brooms or jonos made of grasses.

The household furniture indicates that a stool with a wooden frame and plastic chairs are used. Wooden cots are mostly used by well-to-do Mundari families. But the poorer section of the society use palm-leaf mats for beds to sleep on the ground or floor of the house. Sometimes they also use some cloth over the mat for a more comfortable sleeping.



Material Culture

Examinations of the weapons used by the Mundaris indicate that the bow and arrow is their main weapon of offence and defence. In their own language, they call the bow, a-a and the latter, sar. The two weapons together are known as *a-sar*. A very close examination and verification of the weapon reveals that the handle of the arrow is called the tuti. They also use battle-axe (kapi) and the spear (balam) for hunting purposes. Moreover, the shield (phiri) and two kinds of swords, namely, the khanda and the tarwari are mostly used only at war dances in ceremonies like marriage, religious gatherings and other festivals.

Now-a-days, though the tribe has become an occasional fish-catcher, the varieties of fishing traps and nets they use point to a period when it appears that fishing and hunting were once their principal occupations. The local generic 'Mundari' name for a net is jalom, which almost sound the same as in Sanskrit. A very detailed study indicates that the tribe uses a push-net called pilni, a drag-net called charguria, a small circular prodding fish-net called gira fixed on three sticks and joined together in the form of a triangle, and bamboo fishing-traps called janjid and kumni. But these are removed by plastic nets now days.

LIVELIHOOD

Mundari economy is primarily subsistence oriented and based upon a combination of agriculture, forestry and wage labour. Although the Mundaris are mainly dependent on agriculture, collection of minor forest produce continues to play a major role in household consumption and income generation.Though they are mainly settled agriculturists, they also collect minor forest produce seasonally from forest to supplement their economy.Apart from fire wood and wood for house construction, they collect honey, tendu and sal leaves, mahua (madhuca indica), tola (mahua oil seeds).

Hunting, Fishing and Animal Husbandry are subsidiary to agriculture. They also work as agricultural labourers and unskilled labourers in other fields. They hunt small game animals and occasionally catch fish.They cultivate different types of crops such as paddy, maize, black gram, mustard, bean etc. and also cultivate vegetables in their kitchen garden for their own consumption and also sell in their local market. The Mundari use timber and bamboo for house construction and making their hunting implements. They collect firewood for their own use and also sell it in the local

Food Habits

Their staple food is boiled rice. The well-to-do families take boiled pulse or dal as a side dish. Except on special occasions, their daily food items consists of only some boiled green herb or sag along with the boiled rice, fish and often, the meat of pigeon, poultry etc.

Fowls, goats, hens and pigs are reared for food and ritual sacrifices. Besides the green herbs or sags, the well-to-do families occasionally consume vegetables grown on their own backyard or farm lands. They usually grow onions, brinjals, radishes, tomatoes, pumpkins and gourds, lady's fingers, beans, varieties of arums such as saru, pechki and sweet potato etc.

An examination of the food habits indicates that the women (mostly the house wives) take meal after all the family members finish theirs which is normally followed by the caste societies.

The favourite drink of the Mundari is rice-beer (*handia*). It is generally made of boiled rice, fermented and mixed with certain kinds of other drinks too. This beer is stored in earthen jars and silver jars for about four/five days to become ready for use. Now-a-days, mostly the young ones prefer the distilled liquors available in local shops. Besides, they smoke tobacco and use betel (*gutka*) or betel-nuts.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Family

Family is the smallest social unit among the Mundari tribe. Descent and inheritance are patrilineal and the residence is predominantly patri-local. The status of women is at par with that of men in all spheres of life.

Father is regarded as the head of the family. He is regarded as an authority over family property, income and expenditure and his role stands for discipline, control and cohesiveness in a family as a working unit. He is the chief provider of the family. It has been identified that within the lifetime of the father, the sons do not generally separate from him or from the family. Sons with their wives and children live under the paternal roof. They all join hands in cultivating the family's farm lands, share food from the common family kitchen and bring even their individual earnings, if any, to the common family fund. If a member of the

joint family goes away temporarily for some other labour work to any other place, he does not lose his right to his proper share in the ancestral land in the event of a partition during his absence. At the time of partition of family's property, they follow the rule of equigeniture.

LIFE CYCLE RITUALS

Pregnancy & Child Birth

Birth is regarded as a very joyous event in a Mundari family. It makes the couple fertile and washes the stigma of barrenness of a married woman forever. It enhances the status of the husband and wife as father and mother. As soon as pregnancy is discovered, the Mundaris prepare themselves for offering sacrifices to their deity Garasi bonga.

The pregnant woman is subjected to some customary taboos in respect of her food, work and mobility for the safety of herself and the foetus in her womb. The child birth takes place in a secluded corner of the house with the assistance of a traditional midwife or experienced elderly women.

After the birth of the child, ritual pollution is observed for nine days after which the mother with her baby is taken to a nearby pond and bathed thoroughly to get rid of pollution.

Marriage

The Mundari have a hierarchy of clans. Clusters of clans maintain group solidarity and regulate marriage and socio economic relationships. The clan elders mediate in fixing marriage and bride price. Payment of bride price is an inseparable part of tribal marriage.

Among the Mundari youths, common mode of acquiring mate is through negotiation. Other approved modes of marriage are by mutual consent, by elopement, by service, by intrusion and by exchange. Junior levirate and sororate are also allowed in their society. With the passage of time, at present, negotiated type of marriage which is considered prestigious is being preferred more and more.

Widow remarriage is an accepted practice. However, males marry more frequently than females resulting in a disproportionate rate of widowhood. Divorce is as frequent as remarriage. It is settled by the intervention of clan elders and traditional village leaders. Divorcees are also allowed to remarry in their society.

Death

The Mundari are fully aware of death as a reality. They practice both burial and cremation. Generally they cremate their dead but with some exceptions in cases of abnormal deaths. Young children, adults who die of epidemics or snake bite, pregnant women who die during child birth are all given a burial and in some cases floated down the river.

Their death pollution, in both the cases, lasts for ten days and ends after performance of purificatory rituals and feast. The Mundaris believe that after the death of a person, the spirit of the deceased moves around the remains of the body and only after observance of purificatory rituals it finds its permanent shelter. The relatives of the dead, on the third or fifth day of the death, shave their hair and bathe to purify themselves. Saplings of tiril tree are planted placing an earthen vessel. The spirit of the deceased is welcomed shouting his names and later prayers are offered and other rituals are carried out in its name to appease it.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Mundari religion is an admixture of animism, shamanism and ancestor worship. Their religious beliefs and practices aim at ensuring personal security and happiness as well as community well being and group solidarity. Their religious practices include life crisis rites, cyclic community rites, ancestor worship and totemic rites and observance of taboos.

Mundari religion is more or less the resultant of traditions and beliefs that have come down to them from antiquity. They are basically polytheists. Their Gods differ from one another in composition, function, character and nature. The Mundari people rely on the above stated religious functionaries to please and propitiate their Gods and Goddesses at the time of sickness, pestilence or for the yield of good crops, healthy livestock and good descendants.

The Mundaris worship a number of gods, goddesses, spirits and various supernatural objects. Sing Bonga, the Sun God otherwise called dharam

devta is their supreme god. Other deities are Basuki mata, Dessuali, Marang Bonga, Karam Bonga, Goddess Laxmi etc.

They believe that Sing Bonga punishes those who break the law of marrying within their own tribe. But Sing Bonga is not regarded as a jealous God since he allows his people to worship other celestial beings. They believe in supernatural spirits and their relation towards this supernatural world is one of reverential fear, submission and propitiation.

The contact between supernatural powers and the Mundaris is maintained by two kinds of functionaries known as the 'Pahan' and the 'Sokha'. Pahan, the priest, worships the deities on festive occasions at the sacred grove called sarna, located at the village outskirts.

The Mundaris distinguish between white and black magic. The practitioners of white magic are known as Sokha, Mati, Najao, Deonara, Ojha, Vaidya or Bhagat. The black magic is commonly practiced by witches (dain) and sorceress who if suspected are dealt with heavily by the society. Although the number of witch accusations and witch-hunt has declined a great deal in these days, yet, the deadly fear of witchcraft persists among the Mundaris.

Aesthetic Life

The tribals are born dancers and singers, so also the Mundari. It has been documented that the Mundari tribe is fond of music and dance. Their songs and music are joyous and depicts the festive spirit that prevails whenever there is an occasion for people to gather and rejoice. Their dancing is essentially a village amusement. They form units and revolve in a circular rhythm during the dance performance. The speed of the dancing varies from dance to dance and from region to region. The movements of their dances are very simple and repetitive. They move forward and backward the same steps.

For this purpose they use a variety of musical instruments. Most usable musical instrument is the dholki. They also use the dumang, a drum having an earthen framework within the top and the bottom of which is made of monkey-skin and the dhanpla or tambourine made of wood and goat skin. Other musical instruments are the karetal or cymbal made of brass, the saranga or fiddle made of wood and goat-skin with strings of horse tail, the tuhila or banjo made of gourd shell and wooden handle with a string of silk, the banom- another variety of banjo consisting of two gourd shells and two strings and brass-gauze. Besides these instruments the rutu or bamboo-flute and the murli a smaller flute which is also made of bamboo are used by the tribe in some special occasions and festivals.

Their folk songs and tales are still found to be retained specifically by the older generation.

SOCIAL CONTROL

The Mundari had evolved a polity suited to their needs from a long time. It was largely a two tier structure headed by traditional chiefs and supported by other elders. They however do not have absolute power but go by consensus expressed at the meetings of a regularly constituted panchayat. The position of priest, village headman and the inter village headman in Mundari society are hereditary. Punishments or corrective measures are proportional to the gravity of the breach of norms of the society or the crime committed and the punishments range from simple oral admonition to other measures such as corporal punishments, imposition of fines, payment of compensation and ex-communication from the community. Truth of an incident is determined by oath, ordeals and occult mechanism.

From time to time the Mundari have introduced change in the composition and functions of their traditional community panchayats to meet the challenges of the situation. Hatu panchayat and Parha panchayat are the two important institutions of the Mundari polity. The former panchayat functions at the village level and the later is the regional council of a group of villages. Violation of the rule of endogamy causes permanent social segregation of a family in their society. Their panchayat system deals with the matters relating to incest, beef eating, ill treatment to parents, adultery, theft etc and generally prescribes punishment in form of compensation like giving community feast, performing some prescribed ritual ceremonies etc.

Due to introduction of Panchayati Raj system and formation of 3 tier Institutions, their traditional political system is gradually weakning. The office bearers of the statutory PRIs are elected people's representatives such as Ward Members, Sarapanchs, Chairpersons of Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad etc. At present the officials of statutory PRIs are more concerned about the planned development efforts undertaken by the Government in their respective villages. As a result they are considered more powerful and influential in their region. Now the Mundaris have become politically more conscious than before.

CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Due to development of social and physical infrastructural facilities and continuous assimilation with other caste people, many changes have been found in the socio-economic and political life of the Mundari. Their literacy level has increased to a sizable extent and their children are now found to be enrolled in the adjacent Government schools to get education. It can be seen from the results that most of the tribals encourage their children to pursue education and send them to schools and colleges for education. It is also seen that in many cases the parents are not well educated or sometimes not at all educated but they prefer to send their children to school. Their means of livelihood have also been changed. They have shifted their occupation from agriculture to industrial and tertiary sectors because of the development intervention in their area.

The perceptions, thoughts, food habits, daily life styles, dresses, festivals, customary rules and rituals, the eco-friendly and nature related culture of the Mundari are all deteriorating due to the impact of modernisation. Most of the tribes today do not speak their original language and the Mundaris are no exception. Many Mundaris have lost their original tongue. Today, they use local language – Odia. The practice of healing through herbs as a major practice has been replaced by visiting a doctor and moving patients to hospitals. The effects of modernisation have also been found on their life, ways and beliefs of worshipping nature and natural objects like trees, rivers, mountains and mother earth. However it is a positive change in itself that the custom of animal sacrifice in rituals by the Mundaris is no longer being practiced today.

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